

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost- August 22, 2010

Scripture lessons: Psalm 103:1-8 & Numbers 6:22-27

THE WORLD OF BLESSING

Someone sneezes and we say, “God bless you.” We want to express heartfelt thanks to someone and we say, “God bless you.” If you’ve been around long enough, you probably remember at the end of his television show Red Skelton said to all of us watching, “And may God bless.” Every U.S. president in my memory has ended speeches by saying, “. . . and God bless America.” One of the most time-honored spiritual practices is to “count our blessings”. There’s something old and deep in us that wants to pronounce blessing, receive blessing, and remember blessing.

The Bible attests to that fact. In the creation story in Genesis 1, God blesses all the creatures God has made- the birds, the fish, the animals, and the human beings. God’s blessing brings them to *life* and sustains them in *life*. They live and *we* live only through God’s continual blessing. No wonder our desire for it is *strong*.

Later in the book of Genesis, Jacob tricks his blind father, Isaac, into giving him the fatherly blessing intended for his older brother, Esau. It’s their belief that once this blessing is spoken, it has independent power so that it can’t be taken back. Esau is so infuriated by this trickery that he sets out to kill Jacob. Such can be the power of a blessing conferred or a blessing denied.

In the New Testament, when Jesus is baptized, God blesses him, saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.” Throughout his life, Jesus clings to and nestles in God’s blessing. It equips him to embrace and carry out the extraordinary ministry to which God has called him.

The act of blessing is powerful, which may be why the passage from the book of Numbers from which we read earlier, the one that gives us some of the most famous words of blessing ever written, also gives instruction that only priests should offer blessings. It’s as if pronouncing a blessing is such significant business that it should be left only to professionals.

Think of the times of blessing we have in our worship here. Don’t we feel in those moments a unique power we especially want to take part in? We stop putting together our shopping lists or wondering if we’ve left the garage door open or looking ahead to the game we’ll watch this afternoon. We realize something of unusual importance is happening and we pay closer attention.

A baby is brought to this font and the minister says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God, mother of us all. The Holy Spirit be upon you. You are a child of God, a disciple of Christ, and a beloved member of the family of faith.” Those words of blessing are *powerful*.

Or in those times when we confirm our youth or welcome new members or ordain or commission or affirm people for particular ministries we offer special prayers of blessing for them, often with the laying on of hands. Those moments are highly charged.

Or in the benediction at the end of our services, the energy of our worship is always gathered up and sent with us because we know, even if we seldom articulate it to ourselves, that as we go from here we *need* God’s blessing upon us to live every day. We have to have it, so we leave this place with words of blessing ringing in our souls.

The narrator in Marilynne Robinson’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Gilead*, is a minister named John Ames. He writes to his young son and speaks of how grateful he is that as a pastor he frequently gets to bless people. He assures his son that no one has to be a minister to offer such blessings, but that if you are one it’s easier “because people expect it of you.”

In affirming that anyone can offer a blessing, John Ames shows that he’s a Christian in our Protestant tradition and not a priest in the ancient tabernacle that the book of Numbers knew. What is it that *we* think we’re doing when we speak blessings? As Protestants, we understand ourselves to be calling upon God’s life-giving Spirit. We believe the Holy Spirit is present and available to everyone, so we teach that

anyone can offer a blessing. This isn't something that only pros can do because the power of blessing doesn't belong to special individuals. It comes to all of us from God.

We can invoke God's blessing. We can channel it. We can speak God's blessing with power because God's blessing is carried along on the wings of God's Spirit. We can be messengers of divine blessing, but never its source because it always comes to us from God from whom all blessings flow. We, however, can pass it on.

In today's first Scripture, when the psalmist says, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," it might sound like we can bless on our own, but even in this case we still have no power to bless apart from God. To bless God is to give hearty thanks to God for the blessings we've received from God. We echo back in gratitude the sweetness of the blessings God has poured out on us.

Unlike God, though, we, as our Scriptures and worship remind us, absolutely *need* to speak, receive, and remember God's blessing. Despite that fact, I think we seldom do it enough.

It's easy to forget that the people we're closest to and care about the most yearn for blessing. Certainly, we give our children instruction and advice. We offer our friends a listening ear. We deliver our sister or brother in the faith who's returned home from the hospital a fine, home-cooked meal. We provide our aging parents with special support and our spouse with loyal commitment.

Yet while giving these good gifts, we can also forget that what our loved ones need the most, what in some cases they may in fact be dying of hunger for, is the assurance of God's blessing upon them. UCC minister and author Tony Robinson tells this story from his life:

"I remember how long I waited before receiving a blessing from my father, who had Alzheimer's disease. During his last three years he lived in a small facility with twenty others in various stages of the disease. The summer before he died, my wife and I were there for a visit. The three of us were walking together arm in arm, my wife and I on either side of him. We moved at his slow pace across the dining room toward the door, which led to an enclosed garden. By this time my Dad seldom said much that made sense to us. Even his words had become difficult to understand (as) his speech often (was) slurred. (But) as we crossed the dining room his slippered shuffle drew to a halt. Bent over, he looked up at me and clear as a bell said, "You are a good man." Then he resumed his shuffle toward the door.

"My wife said, 'Did you hear that?' She didn't mean, 'Did you hear the words he said?' She meant, 'Did you hear, really hear, what he was trying to say to you?' It was my father's blessing. Three months later, he died."

Tony Robinson's father assured him that he was a good man. He assured him that he was God's good creation, and that his life was a cherished gift both to this world and to his father. That's a huge part of what it means to bless each other, to remind each other that God's blessing is upon us.

I suspect many of us may feel that we're still waiting to receive a blessing like that from our father or mother or even our spouse. I suspect there are many among us who, as parents, would hop onto the next plane and fly across the country, if we thought it would mean we'd receive such a blessing from one of our children. We long to hear, especially from those closest to us, that we are good people, that we are God's good creation and that our lives are a cherished gift both to this world and our families.

I recently heard again the story of a mother who as the last thing before sending her children off to school would put her hand on each one's head and say, "God bless and keep you today." She wanted her children to know that even though she wouldn't be with them all day, God would be. Even more, she wanted them to understand that a much greater love than hers always was with them. Even when she wasn't there and even when her own love for them faltered, which she knew it certainly did, she wanted her children to know that God's love was with them.

This is what we yearn for, deepest down. We crave to feel in the center of our souls that in, with, through, under, and beyond the love of our families and of others is the love of *God*. We're painfully aware that our love for each other can, does, and often will fail, which is why we need so intensely those unwavering reminders of God's love. Assuring each other of God's unfailing love is the other huge part of what it means to bless each other, to steadily and unequivocally remind each other that God's blessing is upon us.

Forgetting how much we need this assurance is one reason that we neglect to bless each other. Another is that we start to feel that few, if any, people actually deserve it.

A blessing in the Celtic tradition goes like this:

“May those who love us, love us. And may those who don’t love us turn their hearts; and if they don’t turn their hearts, may they turn their ankles, so we’ll know them by their limping.” That captures, I think, the kind of half-blessing we’re usually inclined to offer. It’s a blessing coupled with a curse because we want to bless people if they’re good to us, but curse them if they’re not.

Many of you know that my dear wife, Kathy, grew up in the southern part of this country, in the great state of Texas. From her I’ve learned of a remarkable Southern tradition, one that drove her crazy when it was misused, which it easily can be. Among certain genteel Southerners this tradition allows you to say things sharply critical of or unkind about other people behind their backs so long as you add the phrase, “Bless her heart” or “Bless his heart.”

For example, “He’s such a selfish, grinchy, and ungrateful little man. Bless his heart.”

It’s easy to see how this tradition could be grossly abused, casually allowing all sorts of ugly gossip and backbiting. And yet, I suspect it has its origins in a profound realization. If we sincerely add, “Bless her heart” or “Bless his heart” we ask God to do something which at the moment we find ourselves unable to do- namely, to see this person as a good man or woman, as God’s good creation, as one whose life is a cherished gift both to us and this world. Blessing their hearts, we invoke God’s love for them because we know that our own love is failing.

In closing we remember again that our power to bless each other comes from God. We can be channels of God’s blessing upon us, but never its source because it comes to us from God from whom all blessings flow. God blesses us by bringing us to and sustaining us in life; God blesses us by pronouncing our creation good; God blesses us with the love of each other in, with, through, under, and beyond which is always God’s love for us- the love that does not fail.

Ready to pass on this amazing grace we ask, “Who in our life needs blessing today?” Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

PASTORAL PRAYER

Great God, we rejoice in You. We thank You for all of Your blessings to us- the wondrous gift of life itself, the glory of Your whole creation, Your becoming one of us in Jesus Christ, Your constant presence with us through Your Holy Spirit, and the promise of Your salvation both now and in the life to come- for all of these and for every blessing, we give You praise.

Help us always to be wide open to the full scope of Your goodness to us. Help us always to be clear channels of Your blessing, letting each other know that we are Your good creation and that our lives are cherished gifts to one another and to this world from You. Help us to remember and to share in the midst of our love’s failures, the assurance of Your absolute love. Your love does not fail. Your love for us is there always. So once more we say, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God’s holy name.” We pray this in Jesus’ name and we pray as he has taught us, saying together, “Our Father, . . .” Amen.